

Internet role in human rights gets spotlight

October 25 2011, by Glenn Chapman

Technology titans and political activists gathered here on Tuesday to find ways to ensure that the Internet is used as a tool for human rights instead of as a weapon of oppression.

The overarching goal of the Silicon Valley Human Rights Conference was to collaborate on principles for entrepreneurs to balance pursuit of profit with making sure their creations are used for social good instead of evil.

"Silicon Valley has always been the epicenter of technological innovation," conference organizer Brett Solomon said as he opened the event.

"But now it is also a digital beacon of hope," he said. "From the creation of the chip to the writing of the code... we can commit together to make sure the technologies are a force for good."

Engineers, entrepreneurs, and executives joined with political analysts, activists, and charity groups to delve into the increasingly vital role that the Internet plays in social reform.

Sponsors of the gathering include Google, Facebook, Skype, Mozilla and Yahoo!

"I view the Internet as the greatest opportunity to advance human rights in our lifetime," Facebook vice president of global communication and public policy Elliot Schrage told attendees. "The Internet gives people a

voice, and we need to make sure it stays that way."

Threats targeted at the conference included Western technology firms cooperating with governments to censor what is shared on the Internet or track down people disliked by authorities.

"The bottom line is: we're here because of the actions of governments," Google public policy director Bob Boorstin said in prepared remarks.

"It's not just repressive regimes, but democratic ones too," he said. "We know more than 40 regimes that are actively blocking content around the world."

Google on Tuesday updated its online Transparency Report to provide the public with more insights into government requests for information about its users and demands that it remove content from its services.

"Like other technology and communications companies, Google regularly receives requests from government agencies and courts around the world to remove content from our services and hand over user data," Google said.

In the first six months of this year, US courts and law enforcement made 5,950 requests for data on users, Google said, 93 percent of which were fully or partially complied with. Most requests involve criminal investigations.

India was next with 1,739 data requests, 70 percent of which were fully or partially complied with, Google said.

Google said officials in India also asked for the removal of YouTube videos showing protests against social leaders or containing offensive language aimed at religious leaders. Most of the requests were denied.

China asked that 121 items be removed from Google during the same period, with some details withheld because the California firm believed the Chinese government prohibited full disclosure.

Western countries that ramped up the number of requests for Google to take down items included Britain, France, Germany, Spain and the United States, according to the Mountain View, California-based company.

US officials asked Google to take down YouTube videos of police brutality but the snippets remained online.

"The information that we're disclosing offers only a limited snapshot," Google senior policy analyst Dorothy Chu said in a blog post that also called for modernization of outdated electronics communications laws.

"We hope others join us in the effort to provide more transparency, so we'll be better able to see the bigger picture of how regulatory environments affect the entire Web," she said.

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